KECK, GEORGE ALBERT. Walls and Windows: Ixion Revisited. (1976) Directed by: Gilbert Carpenter. Pp. 8.

The thesis consists of five paintings which were exhibited at the Weatherspoon Art Gallery of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro from April 18 to May 9, 1976, and the written commentary which is bound in this volume.

A 35 mm color transparency of each painting is on file at the Walter Clinton Jackson Library of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

WALLS AND WINDOWS: IXION REVISITED

by

George Albert Keck

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Approved by

Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser Gilbert T. Sewell

Committee Members Andrew Martin

Joseph Crowley

Grace Bastin

Gilbert T. Sewell

April 14, 1976
Date of Acceptance by Committee

CATALOGUE

TITLE	DATE	MEDIUM	DIMENSIONS
Wall/Window I: Faculty	1974	Acrylic	24 X 36
Wall/Window II: Jackson	1974	Acrylic	24 X 36
Wall/Window III: Brown	1975	Acrylic	24 X 36
Wall/Window IV: Weatherspoon	1975	Acrylic	40 X 30
Wall/Window V: Graham	1976	Acrylic	30 X 40

Dimensions are in inches. Height precedes width.

The style and the subject matter of these five paintings have roots in some of my earlier work. Since 1973, however, the development of the wall and window concept has been strongly influenced by courses I have taken and papers I have written.

Significant in the formative phase of this work have been a course in perspective drawing, work in ceramics investigating openings in three-dimensional objects, a design project concentrating on apertures in square cubes, and faculty critiques and evaluations. Especially helpful were the two research projects I carried out in the spring of 1974 on the role of the window in fifteenth century Netherlandish painting, and on the use of the window in modern painting and sculpture.

However, my primary motivation for this series has been the personal fascination with what was happening visually in the process of painting. It is essentially a watercolor technique applied to canvas. There is very little off-the-canvas mixing of pigments. Value and intensity are both developed through many applications of thin acrylic washes, which also give the canvas a rich luminosity which I find highly desirable.

I make preliminary sketches and drawings, based on a particular configuration of forms in space which catches

my eye. Supplementary studies are sometimes done in ink or colored pencil to help in determining the final composition or in checking the overall design for interest and balance.

These are not formal, architectural renderings. The actual buildings serve only as a source of information which is then used, not to mirror reality, but in the construction of a new reality which may vary, for example, in its proportions and color from the original subject. I stop far short of photo-realism, more concerned with color and form and light-shadow relationships than with any question about accuracy in rendering a given building. When considerable detail is included, it is for a specific plastic purpose, such as, in the case of Wall/Window III, that of setting up a contrast between this incredible edifice--its ornate cornice coupled with deteriorating woodwork and five different types of windows--and the streamlined, unadorned, modern structures in the foreground.

In the case of Wall/Window V, the preliminary drawing involved only one window. The placement of the twelve windows was determined by moving window-shaped cutouts around on the canvas and deciding on the appropriate geometric relationships. This canvas is really an exploration of the balancing of unequally spaced elements. This configuration does not actually occur in the Graham Building. It is pure invention. But it is based on the observation that what first appears to be a haphazard placement of window forms

in this particular building is, in reality, just the opposite.

The basic process of work on the canvas itself involves laying out a field of color and form and then making the necessary adjustments to complete and heighten the illusion. Laying out the field is hard work. Making the adjustments is pure pleasure.

Laying out the field involves the development of light and shadow--that combination of contrasting elements I consider the key to my work. The total canvas is first brought up to full intensity as if it were seen in sunlight with no shadows. This involves a graphite grid, underpainting, and the building up of each area with its predetermined hues. It is all done the hard way--brick by brick--avoiding the artificiality of painting a wall first, and then dividing it into bricks or blocks with painted mortar. The brick is very important in these compositions, providing a unit which, when treated serially, not only makes up the wall which frames the window, but also can set up rich, variegated patterns of color and form.

Next, the shadow washes are applied, carefully building up each shaded area to the desired relationship with the areas of light. The light is really exposed for the first time in the presence of shadow--a fact which philosophically seems true of life itself. The warmth and glow you knew were there all the time but could not fully

apprehend are optically turned on as the shaded areas are defined and filled. This act of applying shadows and seeing the intended illusion come to life for the first time is for me an awesome and exhilarating event. I look forward to it. There is, within these moments, a hint at least of the very essence of the creative experience.

The final step--that of making the adjustments--involves many subtle changes which bring all the elements up to their full capacity for fooling the eye. Special attention is given to encouraging the advancement and recession of forms in space. Sometimes as many as six or eight very thin washes are applied in a light or dark area before reaching the intended chiaroscuro effect.

Apart from those already mentioned, there are some other major concerns with which I have tried to deal in these paintings.

Points of View. These paintings can be arranged around three basic viewpoints or formulas.

1. An aperture revealing a shallow corner-space relieved by a glimpse of infinite space.
2. An architectural vista of two or more buildings which exhibit strong contrasts to each other.
3. A "hummingbird view" of a series of uniform windows on a facade parallel to the picture plane.

Stages of Recession. An attempt is made to articulate the position of each plane in space as the subject recedes

into the distance. Some movement is gradual, some abrupt. The most abrupt distance-transition is in the right wall of Wall/Window I. It has the steepest convergence of parallel lines. One can also move more slowly down the left wall. In Wall/Window II, a distinction is attempted between five different locations in space--those of the walls parallel to the picture plane. Only in Wall/Window V is the viewer held back and restricted to an exploration of a broad but shallow spatial field.

Elements of Contrast. These include the juxtaposition of old and new, light and dark, curvilinear and rectilinear, warm and cool, metal and concrete. In connection with this, it will be noted that it is not until the last painting in this series that a face finally appears at a window. The image is based on an old photograph of a young faculty member back in the days of the State Normal and Industrial School (1892) and thus creates a contrasting element within the contemporary facade (1970). The nature of the lines used in rendering the face also suggest a further contrasting element. The curvilinear, physical form against a rectilinear, architectural framework has been a basic juxtaposition in painting since Antiquity, and especially since the Renaissance.

I suspect the face finally appeared in Wall/Window V also because of the long fascination I have had with this sort of image. In some of my work in past years, the

cityscape-collages were teeming with people, and the three-dimensional constructions often had sculpted faces peeking through apertures of one kind or another. I am also very conscious of works of art by other artists featuring people at windows. Two of my favorites are the prostitute in Bosch's Prodigal Son and the sculpted woman gazing out a simulated window on the entrance of the Hotel Jacque-Coeur in Bourges. The sudden appearance of the face in Wall/Window V is also a little reminiscent of the widely published photograph by André Kertész--West 23rd Street, 1970. He made repeated trips to this particular location before finally catching someone looking out a window.

What I hope to accomplish with these paintings involves two major aims. One is that of providing the viewer with the uncanny, optical sensation of illusion. I spend a lot of time while working on a canvas closing one eye and then the other, checking the effect as the spatial field flickers back and forth, in and out.

The phenomenon of seeing architectural views through the window of the canvas is often associated with painting during and since the Renaissance. But even in Antiquity attempts were made to open up the flat surface of a wall with painted "windows." The Ixion Room in the House of the Vettii in ancient Pompeii is one example of this--its walls filled with architectural vistas--fantastic, illusionistic frescos created without the use of sophisticated, modern

perspective systems. This so-called "Fourth Style" of Pompeian wall painting, despite its inconsistencies in spatial rendering, was liberating in terms of extending ones range of vision beyond the wall. While I do make use of basic linear and atmospheric perspective in my paintings, I feel free to bend or suspend the rules when the composition so demands, and as a result, sometimes end up with a "Fourth Style" presentation. This is especially the case with the Brown canvas (Wall/Window III).

During much of the twentieth century the two-dimensional surface of the canvas has been emphasized with flat, abstract painting which allowed little or no hint of any spatial illusion--what Albert Elsen has called "the death of the window." But the window of the canvas has been opening up again with some frequency in the last decade. Artists such as Gabriel Ladermann, Catherine Murphy and Yvonne Jacquette have been turning again to illusion in their translations of the twentieth century urban scene.

There are many other American artists who have done or are doing work involving walls and windows, though not all of them have illusion as their major concern. The list would certainly include Hopper and also the Precisionists Sheeler, Demuth and Spencer. Of particular interest to me today, in addition to those already mentioned, are Howard Kanovitz, Lowell Nesbitt, Gregory Gillespie, Richard Estes, Lois Dodd, Richard Haas and Hugh Kepets. And with regard

to a mutual interest in bricks, I would add Gerhardt Liebmann and Allan McCollum.

My other aim in this series is that of calling attention to the amazing "light show" being staged on the architectural forms around us. I attempt to do this by transposing a particular view into a new setting in which the original vision can be isolated and crystallized, in which a portion becomes the whole. In the past two years I have often stood looking up at some building on campus, making notes and sketches. And inevitably some of those walking by would look in the same direction, wondering what was attracting my attention.

What I was looking at was the phenomenon of form being exposed and defined by light and shadow. And it is that phenomenon with which these paintings are concerned.

> For, don't you mark, we're made so that we love
> First when we see them painted, things we have passed
> Perhaps a hundred times, nor cared to see.[1]

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[1]From "Fra Lippo Lippi" by Robert Browning.